

NIGERIA Police 18 April 2012 (IRIN)

Chidi Odinkalu, chair of Nigeria's National Human Rights Commission, was summoned for an interview with police yesterday over remarks he made in March about the judiciary and the police. In a presentation on 5 March at an event organized by the National Association of Judiciary Correspondents, he said Nigeria was "in the throes of a severe safety and security crisis". He said politicians, judges, magistrates and lawyers were part of the problem. "The response of law enforcement to the incapability of the legal system to ensure convictions is an epidemic of third degree policing, torture and extrajudicial executions," he said.

NOPRIN (The Network on Police Reform in Nigeria) <http://www.noprin.org> in a 2010 report entitled Criminal Force, recounts several cases of police abuse. "Personnel routinely carry out summary executions of persons accused or suspected of crime; rely on torture as a principal means of investigation; commit rape of both sexes," it said. It gave examples of suspects being bound, suspended from ceilings, kicked and beaten with machetes, gun butts, boots, fists, electrical wires and animal hides. Female detainees have been reportedly raped, and males have had sharp objects inserted into their genitals. Such behaviour, NOPRIN said, was sanctioned or even commissioned by some senior officers. The number of extralegal police killings is estimated at 2,500 each year, although accurate statistics are difficult to ascertain. "Killings happen out of the glare of the public eye," said Innocent Chukwuma, director of the Centre for Law Enforcement Education (CLEEN). <http://cleen.org>

NOPRIN has identified two departments well-known for their violent methods: Department B, which responds to active threats to law and order or public safety and security; and Department D, which deals with intelligence gathering and criminal investigations. A unit known as the Police Mobile Force, or MOPOL, falls under the command of Department B. It is a rapid deployment paramilitary outfit of some 30,000 men divided into 47 squadrons of roughly 632 men each. Known by Nigerians as "kill and go", its personnel are feared. Within Department D are the State Criminal Investigation Departments which operate in the country's 37 administrative divisions. There is no evidence-based policing here, critics say. Rather, personnel routinely abuse suspects under interrogation to obtain confessions of guilt. Special Anti-Robbery Squads, under the state criminal investigation departments, are another feared unit, created initially in response to what NOPRIN said was "a perceived" nationwide escalation of gun-related robberies and killings. Human rights activists say genuine attempts to reform the police have not been implemented.

Given these problems, public perceptions of the police are abysmal. People tend to avoid the police. CLEEN's Chukwuma said annual research indicated that 80 percent of Nigerians do not report crimes or problems to the police. "Rather, they use traditional means to solve problems," he said, "especially in the rural areas". Chukwuma said a public alienated from the police was an indicator of public alienation from the government which, occasionally, talked about police reforms but never followed through.

Many reasons have been cited for improper police behaviour: a repressive colonial police heritage; a poorly funded and ill-equipped police force; a highly centralized police structure plagued by political interference. Recruitment has been compromised and police training is poor, leading to the hiring of unsuitable personnel. Salaries are bad, making police prone to corruption and other crimes. Suspects are tortured for confessions because police lack the ability and means to conduct thorough criminal investigations. NOPRIN says in many police stations, one staff member oversees torture in a room specially set aside for this practice. Police are killed in their hundreds or even thousands every year, which may in part explain their behaviour and their attitude to the public. Police complain of poor working conditions, unhealthy environments, long hours and inadequate housing - all demotivating factors.